



PROACTIVE



PERSONALIZED



PATIENT-DRIVEN

CARE



VA  
HEALTH  
CARE

Defining  
**EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century



2012

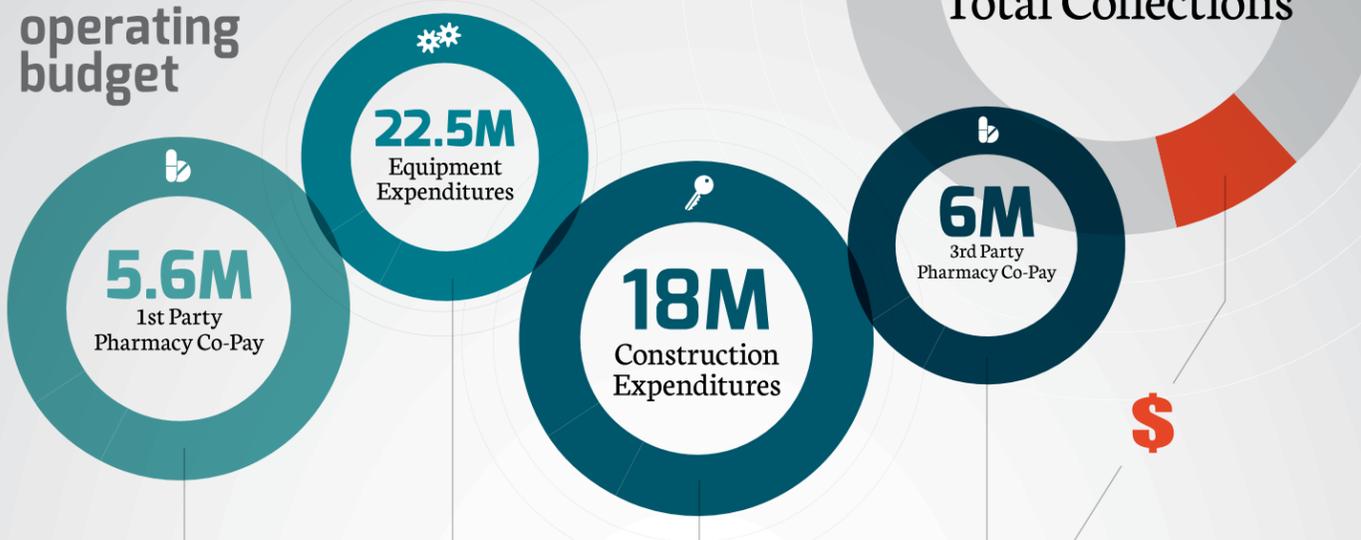
Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center

ANNUAL REPORT

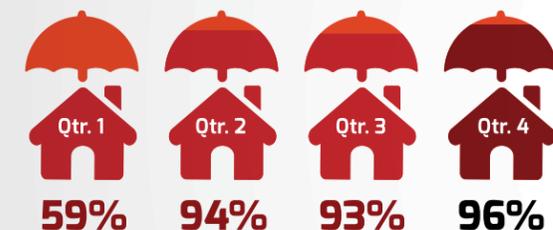
## 2012 BY THE NUMBERS

# \$250,143,000

operating budget

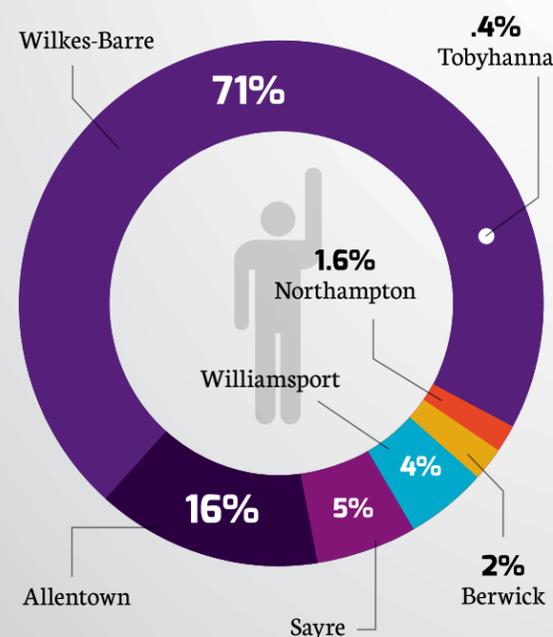


### PERCENT OF HOUSING VOUCHERS ISSUED TO HOMELESS VETERANS

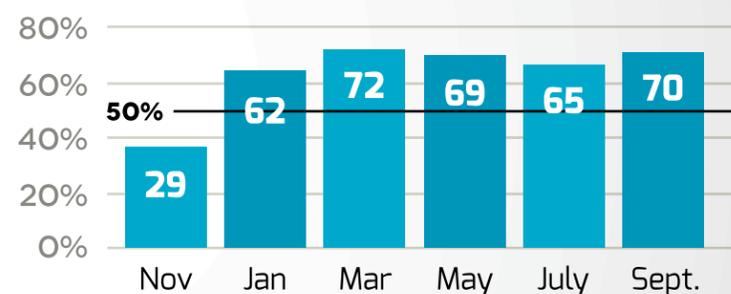


# 393,189

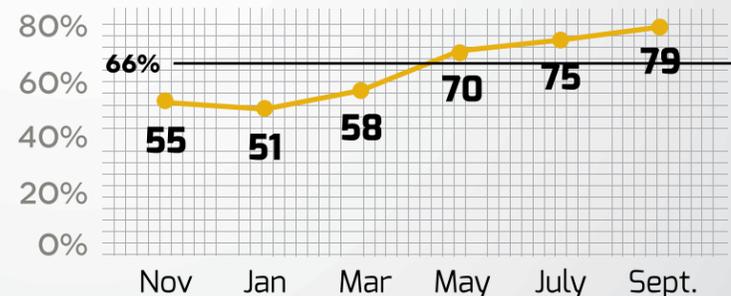
outpatient visits



### CONTACT WITH PATIENT TWO DAYS AFTER DISCHARGE



### SAME DAY ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE



\*Black lines in graphs above represent overall VISN 4 benchmark.

# 136.97

AVERAGE DAILY CENSUS

(average number of inpatients at the medical center on any given day)

# 40,102

UNIQUE PATIENTS

(the number of individual Veterans Wilkes-Barre saw in Fiscal Year 2012)

Cover: Veteran and CLC resident Dan Curatola in the wheelchair along with Bill Roberts (*Fee Basis Recreation Therapy Assistant*, standing)

## Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers, and friends of the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center:

Our goal is to provide every Veteran in this region with proactive, personalized, and patient-driven care.

The City of Wilkes-Barre was founded in 1769 by patriots who named our city after two English friends of the American Colonies: John Wilkes and Isaac Barre. Soon afterwards, Wilkes-Barre and our entire Nation were swept up in the American Revolution, transforming the future of this region and its citizens.

More than 200 years later, our area is once again witnessing a great transformation. The Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is at the forefront of a total redesign of the way health care is being delivered to Veterans.

In this year's annual report, we'll tell you what our facility is doing to meet this revolutionary goal. You'll read about how we've significantly augmented our mental health and women's health programs to improve our ability to serve Veterans in these critical areas. You'll learn how an employee's great idea led to a first-in-the-nation program to improve the quality of life of Veterans with dementia.

And you'll find out about the unprecedented level of construction projects now underway or on the drawing board to transform our physical plant to meet the needs of 21st century Veterans and their families.

In 2013, we will continue to improve the experience our patients and their families have with us. Among other innovations, we will be working with the Planetree Alliance to help us put our patients at the center of everything we do. It's the next logical step in our transformation process.

I am very proud of everything our hospital accomplished in 2012, and is accomplishing today. I thank you for your continued support of our transformation—and, more importantly, for your support of the heroes who have defended America's freedom while in uniform.

Our Veterans have earned the best health care available. It is my continued honor, and the honor of all our employees and volunteers, to fulfill our Nation's obligation to them.

Sincerely,  
**Margaret B. Caplan**  
Director

**Wilkes-Barre VA Executive Leadership Team (l to r):**  
Dr. Mirza Ali, Chief of Staff; Antoinette Germain-Tudgay, Interim Associate Director; Valerie Boytin, RN, MSN, Associate Director for Nursing Service/Nurse Executive; Margaret B. Caplan, Medical Center Director.



## Director's Letter



# Mental Health Services Move Forward

New hires improve access and quality of care.

In 2012, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki announced that the Department was hiring 1,600 more clinical staff “to address the growth in mental health requirements spawned by a decade of tough, high risk, high stress, repetitive, combat deployments.”

Here at Wilkes-Barre, more than 100 professionals support the mental health needs of our Veteran patients and their families—nearly 40 of whom were hired in 2012 alone.

“We’ve added a lot of new staff, and made adjustments to the duties of current staff,” explains Aruna Bhatia, MD, chief of our psychiatry service. “It’s helped us to improve our ability to provide quality care, and to increase access to our care.” At the heart of the improvements to mental health care, Bhatia explains, is the establishment of mental health care teams. These teams are based on VA’s Patient Aligned Care (PACT) teams, a team of health care professionals who partner with Veterans to listen to their health care concerns, let them know their options, and help them decide what they want to do about them.

Wilkes-Barre is in the process of developing teams of mental health professionals to include psychiatrists, therapists, clinical support staff, and administrative (clerical) staff. They will work together to provide an entire community of care for each mental health patient. “Our goal is to establish four teams at Wilkes-Barre, and one at each of our Community-Based outpatient clinics (CBOCs),” says Bhatia. “In our teams, Veterans know that even though the people they are seeing are functioning within their own well-defined roles, they have the ability to access other support.”

The new teams, and the additional staff, have already improved access to care for Veterans. While Wilkes-Barre Veterans with mental health needs have always had the ability to see a provider on the same day they need one for an issue that requires immediate attention, they now have to spend less time in waiting areas before a provider is available.

“We’ve created more intake slots for our patients, and we’re not juggling around slots as much,” Bhatia explains. “We’re also making significant use of telemental health (using telecommunications technologies such as videoconferencing to provide mental health services) which has allowed us to increase access to our services through our CBOCs.”



“We know that when we diagnose and treat (mental health issues) people get better. Treatment works!”

- Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs

“We’ve also been able to put suicide prevention at the forefront, with two suicide prevention coordinators; we’ve started new patient education programs; added nursing and clerical staff; and continued to bring new evidence-based psychotherapies to the treatment of illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders.”

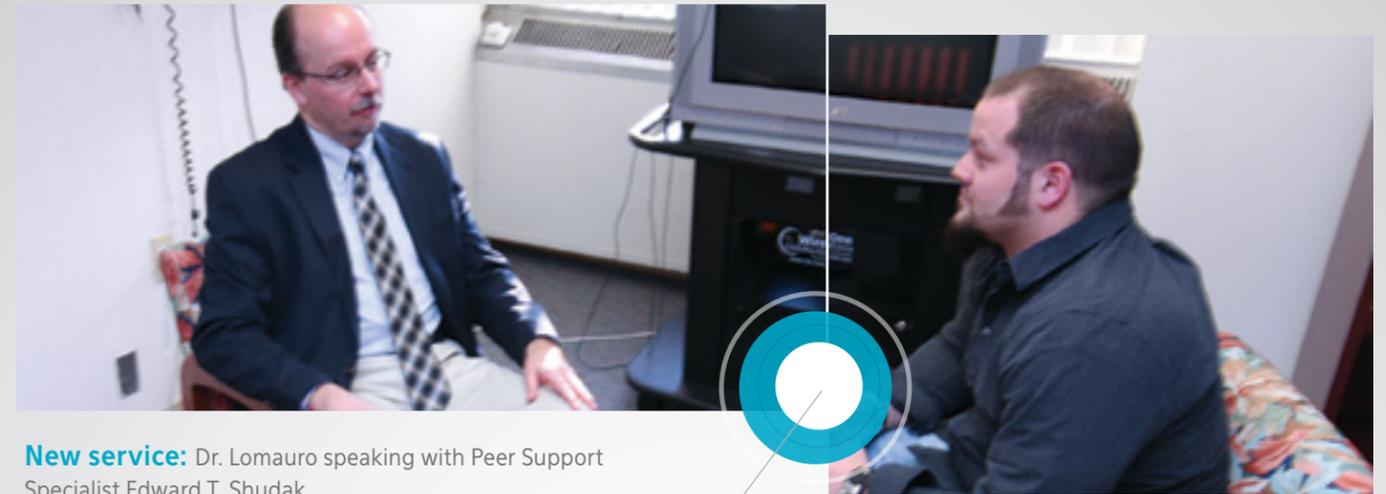
In the near future, psychiatry service plans to add staff to provide marriage and family counseling services to Veterans, and to expand and modernize the mental health service area. “It’s getting a little cramped here with all the additional staff members,” Bhatia tells us.

As Secretary Shinseki has said, “Among the 8.6 million Veterans enrolled in VA healthcare, mental health treatment is up. At the same time, for Veterans receiving VA treatment, our suicide rates are down.” Wilkes-Barre is proud to be a part of that record of success.



Table photo: Table set in honor and memory of suicide survivors and those who lost their lives to suicide.

**United against suicide:**  
Suicide Prevention Program: September 2, 2012



**New service:** Dr. Lomauro speaking with Peer Support Specialist Edward T. Shudak.

# New Psychology Service Ushers in the New Year

Access to psychologists to increase at the hospital and outpatient clinics.

As others celebrated the start of a new year, Wilkes-Barre celebrated the start of a new service to Veterans. On December 31, 2012, the facility’s psychology service, under the direction of Timothy Lomauro, Ph.D., began its existence as a separate entity, serving Veterans at the Wilkes-Barre hospital and our Williamsport and Allentown outpatient clinics.

The new service includes eight psychologists; five assigned to the mental health clinic at Wilkes-Barre; three at the Allentown outpatient clinic; and one at the Williamsport clinic. Psychology will soon add an additional psychologist and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist at Wilkes-Barre.

“We’re increasing access to psychology services, not only in mental health clinics, but throughout all areas of the hospital,” Lomauro explains. As an example of the service psychologists provide, he cited the use of evidence-based therapies (psychological approaches and techniques based on the best available research evidence) that provide safe and effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues. Psychology is also involved in providing care on the inpatient psychiatric unit, at the Community Living Center, and in the Home-Based Primary Care program.

He also mentioned other areas in which the service is included, including tobacco treatment, stress reduction, addiction treatment, geriatrics, and weight management programs. The additional staff psychologists will be part of interdisciplinary



teams supporting Veterans in each area, providing help in individual and group settings. The service also plans increased involvement with Veterans undergoing medical treatment in areas such as oncology and pulmonology.

“We’re really trying to address the issue of health behavior with Veterans, especially for those who want to make changes in their behavior,” Lomauro says. Using the principles of patient-centered care, he and his staff will provide patients with access to evidence-based therapies, allowing them to take control of their own health care.

Lomauro also hopes the new psychology service will be helpful to other clinicians. “We want to be very integrative and reach out and be useful to other areas of our medical center,” he tells us. “We’ve got some great people who can help address our Veterans’ needs across the wide range of programs in which they are receiving care at our medical center.”



“It’s a great opportunity for Psychology to collaborate with other disciplines in extending the range of services offered to Veterans.”

- Timothy Lomauro, Ph.D., Chief of Psychology Services





# A Big Win for Dementia Patients

An innovative proposal results in improved patient care.

In 2011, Recreation Therapist Amie Dorney entered a contest—and Wilkes-Barre Veterans won!

Amie's proposal to improve care for dementia patients in Wilkes-Barre's Community Living Center was a winner in VA's Employee Innovation Initiative—a competition allowing VA to tap the ingenuity and innovative spirit of VA employees.

Her idea, which received a grant of \$150,000 from the Department, had two components. The first was to create a “multi-sensory” environment for dementia patients that give them a sense of control over their environment and to calm them down when they are in an agitated state.

The second was to improve training for those responsible for the care of dementia patients, so they could better understand and empathize with those patients and their illness.

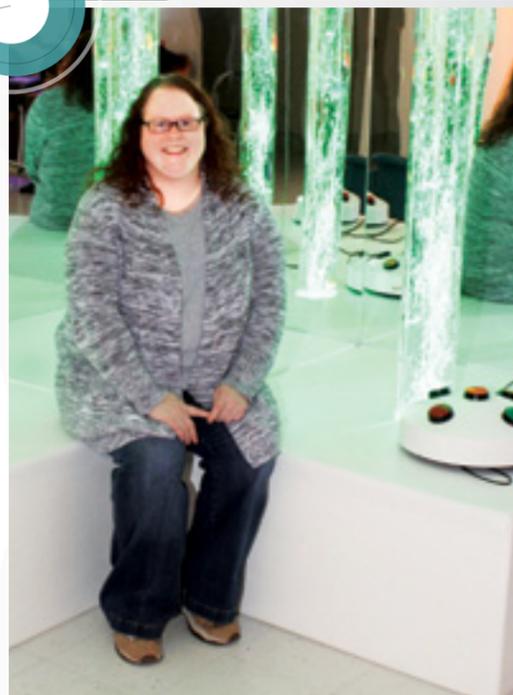
The multi-sensory room furnished by the grant opened in 2012. The room includes bubble tubes, sound and touch activated interactive wall panels, and projection screens showing a variety of peaceful scenes. A comfortable chair gently massages Veterans in synchronization with

music they choose. The goal is to stimulate the senses and provide a calming experience, but the rooms are also used to preserve memory and for therapy.

“The room is very patient-centered—it's all about them!” Amie explains. “Just because you have dementia, your life isn't over.”

Amie cites one dementia patient, a former fisherman, who enjoys counting the fish he sees in the bubble tubes. Another likes playing matching games to test memory. The two coexist, side-by-side, happily engaged with the support of a watchful therapist who is always present when the room is in use.

The training component involves a daylong program, informing Wilkes-Barre staff about each of the five stages of dementia, and how to cope with them. Wilkes-Barre also offers a “virtual dementia tour,” involving the use of special goggles, headphones, and hand and gait restrictions, giving staff a first-hand understanding of dementia patients' experience. Eventually, all hospital staff will go through this experience.



**Award-winner:** Recreation Specialist Amie Dorney surrounded by interactive bubble tubes.



Some VA facilities have sensory rooms, and others have special dementia training, but we're the first to have both!

- Amie Dorney, Recreation Therapist

# Better Health Through Better Eating

Nutrition Service is using innovative thinking to help Veterans eat better, and live longer.

According to VA statistics, between 70 and 74 percent of Veterans who receive care at VA facilities are overweight or obese. At Wilkes-Barre, we're doing all we can to help Veterans improve their eating habits.

## Healthy Teaching Kitchens

A year ago, our medical center purchased two healthy teaching kitchens: portable kitchens with induction burners, a convection oven, and a sink. These allow dietitians to demonstrate basic food preparation skills and ways to shop and eat healthier. An overhead mirror offers a birds-eye view of what's being prepared.

“Our kitchens are similar to something you would see on the Food Network,” says Melissa Novak, Chief of Nutrition & Food Services. “Two of our dietitians (Gladys Basila-King and Rose Anne

Wincek) have culinary backgrounds, and they do regular demonstrations.”

Many of the demonstrations are part of VA's MOVE! program, a nationwide weight management program designed to help Veterans lose weight, keep it off, and improve their health. Attendees learn how to prepare heart-healthy foods and receive other heart-healthy nutrition tips. Other programs are being planned for homeless Veterans—and, last spring, a kitchen was used to prepare the food for a Women Veterans luncheon.



The cooking demonstrations help you understand how easy it is to cook healthy. They give you a better understanding on how to use different foods within recipes.

- Charles Hamberger  
Veteran & MOVE! Program participant

## Computation

Computation is a computer software package that interacts with VA's electronic health records system to offer more and healthier menu choices for hospitalized Veterans.

Wilkes-Barre is the first hospital in VISN 4 to use this system, which will allow dietitians to better meet the food preferences of individual patients; save money through improved food inventory control; ensure that patients' food allergies are taken into account; and enable us to use new standardized recipes which will make the food we serve taste better.

In the near future, Veterans in our Community Living Center (CLC) will be able to select what they want to eat using the system. “With Computation, we'll be able to better respond to patient requests and needs,” Novak explains. “And by making sure we have what we need and decreasing waste, we'll keep costs down.”

## Burlodge

A new Burlodge meal delivery system has been purchased and is being implemented in FY 2013. The system will improve our ability to provide Veteran-centered meal service. Through the use of convection re-thermalization, medical center patients will enjoy a greater variety of food items. Also, thanks to the new system, many CLC residents will be served their meals buffet-style. In addition to the increased options available, a computerized time and temperature monitoring system is included which will ensure safe holding and service temperatures of the meals we serve.

**Pictured:** Gladys Basila-King, Rose Anne Wincek (in chef's hat).



# It's All in the Wrist!

New cardiac catheterization procedure, and lab, saves time and reduces complications.

Cardiac Catheterization is a medical procedure to diagnose and treat some heart conditions. In the procedure, a long, thin, flexible tube called a catheter is put into a blood vessel in the body and threaded to the heart. Through the catheter, doctors perform diagnostic tests and treatments to determine whether and where arteries are clogged—and, when possible, to clear that clogging.

Veterans at Wilkes-Barre requiring this procedure are doubly fortunate. Not only are they treated in our new, state-of-the-art Cardiac Catheterization and Electrophysiology lab, but they may also be able to take advantage of getting the catheterization (or “cath”) procedure done via the radial artery (wrist). This method reduces the risk of bleeding; requires minimal bed rest; and allows patients to be discharged as soon as two hours after the procedure.

According to Anuradha Tunuguntla, MD (known as “Dr. Anu” to her patients), director of the lab, the procedure, called radial catheterization, involves inserting the flexible catheter tube through a patient’s wrist (radial artery). In most hospitals, this

## Cardiac cath lab team (l to r):

Richard Weaver RCIS-Lead MIT; Alice Turner RN, BSN; Dr. Anuradha Tunuguntla, Director, Cardiac Cath Lab; Kristina Griffiths RN, BSN-Nurse Manager; Donald Austin RN



process is still accomplished through an incision in the groin area.

Since the lab began doing catheterizations last March, two-thirds of the more than 100 procedures Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center has done have used this new method, without any significant complications.

Patients are “very happy” with the new procedure, compared to getting the procedure done from the groin, Dr. Anu tells us. They’re also pleased with the new facility. “Before the lab opened, our patients who needed catheterizing had to be here at 3:30 a.m. to take a bus to New York City and that was very stressful.”

Now, she says, “we’re able to accommodate Veterans in a very timely fashion. We serve Veterans from the Lebanon VA, as well.”

There’s a third way in which Veterans using the lab are fortunate—they are served by an exceptional staff. Dr. Anu proudly showed us a thank you letter (one of many she receives) from a retired Army Ranger following his procedure. “Everyone at the Wilkes-Barre hospital treated me nice,” he wrote.



Dr. Anu’s staff were great! They were angels from heaven relieving me of all my fears and answered all my concerns. When I actually got to the operating room, I was so calm and peaceful. I would like to thank them all from the bottom of my heart. //

- Bruce Donaldson  
Retired Army Ranger

**Surgeon at work:** A catheterization procedure in progress.



Personalized

# Wilkes-Barre Welcomes Women Veterans

New people and new programs mean better service for women who have served.



**Pictured:** Dr. Ghosh, Patricia Conroy, Lori Manfre-Conahan.

For the more than 1,800 women Veterans receiving care at the Wilkes-Barre VAMC, 2012 was an exciting year—and 2013 promises to be even better! According to Patricia Conroy, LCSW, the facility’s Women Veterans Program Manager, the addition of two new staff members will increase the level of service our facility is able to provide women.

Sumit Ghosh, MD, whose specialty is obstetrics and gynecology, has joined Wilkes-Barre as the new Medical Director for Women’s Health. In addition, Lori Manfre-Conahan, PA-C, a new full time Women’s Comprehensive Primary Care Provider, has also joined our staff.

“We’re extremely excited about this,” Conroy explains. “It means we will be able to treat more women at our facility, and not have to contract as much care out with local providers. This will allow us to improve the continuity of the care we provide to our female patients, and give us greater flexibility in scheduling appointments.”

Wilkes-Barre already provides a number of services targeted to the unique needs of women Veterans, including treatment for

post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and issues related to homelessness. The facility has a military sexual trauma coordinator for those needing help in that area, and publishes a newsletter every six months on issues of importance to women.

In addition, Wilkes-Barre holds an annual Breast Cancer Awareness Walk and Health Fair, which took place last October, and holds a Veterans Day event to honor the special contributions of women Veterans. Conroy is a frequent guest speaker at local groups, military, and Veterans Service Organization events about the benefits and services VA offers to women, and has discussed the program on area television and radio programs.

In fall 2013, Wilkes-Barre expects to begin construction on a new Women’s Health Center, centralizing services for women Veterans, including state-of-the-art examination rooms, lactation rooms, an educational area, telehealth capabilities and much more. “We’ll be putting all of our services for women Veterans under one roof,” says Conroy.

Personalized



I’m so glad that we have been able to expand our gynecological services both at the Medical Center in Wilkes-Barre and our associated outpatient clinics, including Allentown, which I visit weekly. We want to be every woman Veteran’s first choice for her health care. //

- Sumit B. Ghosh, MD  
Medical Director for Women’s Health



Our team is focused on taking care of women Veterans’ health care needs in one place. We are trained and ready to provide the personalized health care that our women Veterans have earned. //

- Lori Manfre-Conahan  
Women’s Comprehensive Primary Care Provider



**Our projects team members are Rock Stars, from left to right:**

Michael Somoga, Engineering Technician,  
 Andrew Cullipher, Interdisciplinary Engineer  
 Orlando Mirarchi, Supervisory General Engineer  
 John Krynick, General Engineer  
 Robert Calarco, Interdisciplinary Engineer

**See the future:** Artist renderings of new specialty clinic areas (top) and oncology suite (below).



Exam Rooms

# Building a Better Future

Pardon our dust as Wilkes-Barre modernizes our hospital to provide patient-centered care.

**A**t the heart of everything the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center does is the principle of “patient-centered care.” We are putting the lives of Veterans and what matters to them and their families at the center of our thinking, and transforming our physical plant around their needs.

“Patient-centered care is the focus of everything we do in design and construction,” says Chris English, PE, Chief of our Facility Management Service. “We’re developing a culture that thinks that way.”

The facility is also in the planning stages for a new \$10 million Community Living Center. The Center will resemble home as much as possible for its residents. Its layout will be organized under the principles of the Planetree process, which aims to provide more personal and human care in hospitals.

Throughout our facility, state-of-the-art medical equipment has been installed, and more is on the way. Already there is a new Cardiac Catheterization Lab, Hemodialysis Treatment Unit and a Positive Emissions Tomography (PET) scanner, which uses radiation to produce three-dimensional images of processes within the body. TUG robots, which automate delivery of pharmaceuticals and other supplies throughout the hospital, can be seen in our hallways and elevators.

Recently completed is a new “Patriot Brew” coffee shop in the main lobby, to provide coffee and other items to Veterans and their visitors. The entire main entrance is in the process of being redesigned, and the exterior will be re-landscaped and new benches placed.



Oncology Suite



Everyone is coming together as a team to make these improvements. The facility needs this—and the Veterans certainly deserve it! //

- Chris English, PE  
 Chief of Facility Management Services



Reception Desk

## Other projects underway or in the process of being designed include:

- ★ Expanding our emergency department to 13 modernized treatment rooms.
- ★ Designing a new oncology suite. The new suite will include an improved family waiting area.
- ★ Renovating our women’s clinic. The new clinic will include an obstetrics and gynecology (ob/gyn) clinic to provide care for women Veterans, and will feature patient-focused design.
- ★ Opening a new wound care unit. Specifically designed to meet the needs of combat-wounded Veterans, the new unit will open in June 2013.
- ★ Rehabilitating our mental health suite.
- ★ Improving the audiology and sleep lab suites. We will be upgrading the existing audiology laboratory and adding an additional audiology testing booth for Veterans with disabilities.
- ★ Renovating our operating rooms and gastrointestinal (GI) suite.
- ★ Expanding our compensation and pension examination area. To speed up VA’s ability to decide Veterans’ disability claims, we will create a larger and more modern area to conduct the physical examinations.
- ★ Upgrading our kitchen, which includes a larger food preparation areas, a new food distribution system, and an electrical upgrade.

**The facility will also receive other infrastructure improvements**, including a new water tower; a new boiler plant; upgrades to electrical and plumbing systems; new elevators; and, the replacement of the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system that will be highly focused on saving energy and protecting the environment. We’ll also focus on redundancies, so that the campus can continue to function if any of its components fail to work.

While most of the improvements currently on the drawing board will benefit patients, Wilkes-Barre is also making some improvements that will benefit our staff—and, in turn, improve their ability to care for the Veterans it is our privilege to serve.

For employees, we are in the process of designing a new library, a new training area, and a new employee lounge. Because health care can sometimes be a stressful occupation, we are going to build several locations where employees can relax and recharge.

There will also be a new gymnasium with open space for Pilates, yoga, and jazzercise classes to keep employees fit, healthy, and on the job. It’s all part of our hospital’s goal of being an “employer of choice,” attracting and retaining the best talent to serve those who have defended our freedom in uniform.

# Justice is Served

VA's Veteran Justice Outreach Program offers Vets a chance to turn their lives around.

**M**any Veterans have difficulty readjusting to civilian life—and those problems often lead to problems with the justice system. For some of these Veterans, receiving the treatment and other social programs VA has to offer could make a big difference in their future lives.

Wilkes-Barre has reached out to community justice programs to identify and work with Veterans who are having problems or repeated contact with the legal system. Kim Sapolis-Lacey, Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialist, collaborates with law enforcement, probation and parole departments, jails, and the court systems in nineteen Pennsylvania counties to identify Veterans in the criminal justice system who are not fully accessing our services.

As an alternative to jail, Lacey explains, “we try to get Veterans healthy in every way. We get them involved in programs ranging from primary care, to substance abuse care, to mental health care, to employment programs.”

She tells of one Veteran who was enrolled in a recovery program instead of being incarcerated, who is now working full time, has married, and started a family. Another Veteran formed his own Alcoholics Anonymous chapter after receiving help from the program.

Within Wilkes-Barre's catchment area, there are two Veterans Courts, and a Veterans Docket within Luzerne County's Mental Health Court. These courts work with VA to ensure that Veterans in the program are provided with comprehensive supervision, treatment, and review while they are on probation. Defendants are ineligible for the program if they are charged with certain serious offenses.

Recently, Pennsylvania became the first state in the Nation to offer VJO services at

**Talking about justice:** (top) Judge Michael Barrasse and Director Caplan. (Bottom) Participants in Veterans Justice Outreach Program, February 28, 2012.



the district court level. Monroe, Centre, and Westmoreland Counties are hosting a pilot program whereby magisterial district court judges will refer Veterans facing non-traffic citations, such as harassment, disorderly conduct, public drunkenness and other “summary-level” offences to VA for help. Previously, VJO only helped Veterans at the county or Common Pleas court level.

Sapolis-Lacey also visits Veterans in six Pennsylvania jails to help them obtain VA services for which they may be eligible. If they are within six months of discharge, she helps get them enrolled for VA support services and makes appointments for when they get out.



“It's really great to see people progress in the program. Judges like it--and Veterans are so appreciative of our support.”

- Kim Sapolis-Lacey, VJO Specialist

Patient-Driven



# Olympic-Style Competition Comes to Wilkes-Barre

Patient-Driven



2012 was the year of the Games of the XXX Olympiad in London—and the Wilkes-Barre Community Living Center (CLC) also hosted a competition last October at which athletes demonstrated their skills in a wide variety of sports.



**Competitions:** CLC residents participating in October Olympic Games.



**D**ubbed “The Wheelchairs of Patriots,” the competition pitted CLC floors against each other in spirited games of shuffleboard bowling, beanbag tossing, wheelchair and foot races, and five other events.

Each of the more than 50 competitors competed in at least five events and everyone received t-shirts, prizes, ribbons, or medals.

“They had a ball!” said recreation therapist Amie Dorney. Amie thanked the many VA volunteers, staff, and even other Wilkes-Barre patients, who helped make the event a success.



## Patient-Driven

One of the primary tenets of patient-centered care is empowering patients to make decisions related to their own health care.

Wilkes-Barre offers two very special treatment options to our patients: Horses Helping Heroes, an equine therapy program to help Veterans with coping and social skills and self-esteem issues, and Project Healing Waters, a program dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled Veterans through fly fishing and fly tying education and outings. Occupational therapist Maria Miller and recreational therapist Marian Skomsky are the co-facilitators of the two projects. According to Marian, "Veterans are in these programs because they want to be there. The programs really are patient-driven."



**A horse tale:** Veterans John Miller (top) and William Harrison (side) interacting with equine friends. Maria Miller observes.



## Project Healing Waters

For the past five years, Wilkes-Barre has participated in Project Healing Waters, part of a nationwide effort now available at many VA health care facilities and Department of Defense installations.

Here, from May through October, 30 inpatients and outpatients gather once a month at a local rod and gun club or state park, where volunteers teach the art of fly-fishing to those without experience in the sport. The VA therapists work with volunteers to modify fly-fishing tasks so that Veterans overcome whatever physical limitations they may have in order to successfully pursue the sport.

In winter months, classes on casting, fly-tying, and other fishing-related arts are taught at the Medical Center. Altogether, 85 Veterans participated in the program in 2012.

One Veteran, a former resident of the Community Living Center, was initially introduced to fly fishing through Project Healing Waters as an outpatient. With medical approval, he was able to continue his participation in the program as a resident of the Community Living Center. Since his discharge, he has

resumed participation in the program on an outpatient basis. During the winter months at home, his favorite leisure interest is fly tying. He has built an entire workshop in his home to create unique fly designs. The newest referral to the program is a blind Veteran who hopes to become an avid fisherman, with the aid of Healing Waters Volunteers.

"The lead Project Healing Waters volunteer and I presented an informational session at a Project Healing Waters Train the Trainer Workshop this past fall," Marian recalls proudly.



The workshop organizers recognized our program as a model for a VA facility!

- Marian Skomsky, Recreational Therapist

## Horses Helping Heroes

Once a month in warm weather, another group of Veterans visits Ananda Farm in New Tripoli, Pa. These Veterans with mental health issues are relearning social skills through interactions with horses.

"It's not a horseback riding program," Marian explains. "It's an equine-assisted therapy program."

The 20 Veterans who took part in the program in 2012 learned to groom horses, guide them through obstacle courses, and developed unique

relationships with individual horses. As Veterans worked with the horses, they gained self confidence and new awareness of their own strength and needs for improvement.

Because horses are prey animals and really respond to the emotions of people, they help Veterans develop coping, self-esteem, and social skills as well as other important behaviors essential in mental health recovery. Every month, a different theme reinforces a positive desirable behavior.



The program has had lasting effects on our Veterans. They leave each session with a sense of accomplishment and improved self awareness and eagerly await the next scheduled visit.

- Maria Miller, Occupational Therapist



# Welcome New Leaders

## 1 Valerie Boytin, RN, MSN

Associate Director for Nursing Services/Nurse Executive

Years with VA: **36 years**

I serve Veterans by: Supporting our nursing staff throughout the facility and our CBOC's.

## 2 Christopher D. English, P.E.

Chief, Facilities Management Service

Years with VA: **6 years**

I serve Veterans by: Ensuring the effective and safe operation of the entire Medical Center.

## 3 Gail K. Ziegler

Voluntary Service Officer

Years with VA: **3 years**

I serve Veterans by: Supporting the volunteers and donors who give so much back to our Veterans.

## 4 Suzette M. Poletti

Interior Designer

Years with VA: **1 Year with VA, 33 Years Interior Design Experience**

I serve Veterans by: Implementing positive change to support the health and wellness of the patients and staff.

## 5 Helen (Melinda) Ratliff

Chief Logistics Officer

Years with VA: **24 Years**

I serve Veterans by: Ensuring we have the needed supplies and equipment, that the departments are not cancelling appointments due to stock not being available, and equipment is being replaced when needed and new needs are also met.

## 6 LeVonn Anderson

Chief, Environmental Management Services

Years with VA: **3 Years**

I serve Veterans by: Disinfecting the facility, making sure that our Veterans don't catch another illness while being treated, and keeping our facility very clean.

## 7 Felissa Koernig

Executive Assistant to the Director

Years with VA: **5 Years**

I serve Veterans by: Assisting the facility with its many construction projects and moves as the space coordinator.

## 8 Timothy Lomauro, Ph.D.

Chief, Psychology Service

Years with VA: **4 Years**

I serve Veterans by: Ensuring our veterans receive timely, effective, compassionate, and respectful psychological assessment and intervention services, and developing new programs and services that reflect a patient-centered model of care.



# Jolly Good Fellows

PMF's lend a hand to improve our care

Administrative Officers (AOs) are the "right hand" of clinical leaders; are included in high-level decision-making; develop and interpret important data on the quality of our care; and make important presentations to senior leaders on major issues. They also oversee budgeting for their service; participate in human resource decisions; and monitor workload and productivity.

To ensure our hospital continues to have outstanding AOs, Wilkes-Barre recruits Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs). The PMF program is a prestigious two-year paid government fellowship sponsored for recent graduate students who wish to work for the Government. Following the conclusion of the fellowship, the fellows may have the opportunity to become full-time employees.

Wilkes-Barre now has five PMFs: Jose M. Garcia and Kyle Berger of the Office of Human Resources; Jason Cave of the Office of the Director; and Michelle T. McBee and Larkin R. Harris of the Office of the Director, a PMF "graduate," leads the group. Twice

Patient-Driven



a month, PMF's have "lunch and learn" meetings with senior hospital leadership. At every other meeting, they learn about an aspect of hospital management from a senior leader.

Other times, these talented young people are challenged to come up with innovative solutions to current Medical Center issues. Recently, they were asked to look at the experiences of dialysis patients who are receiving care in the community, but could be served by VA. They were charged with finding a patient-centered way to improve our service, and succeeded—with flying colors!



Our director is committed to making sure all of our participants have a good experience.

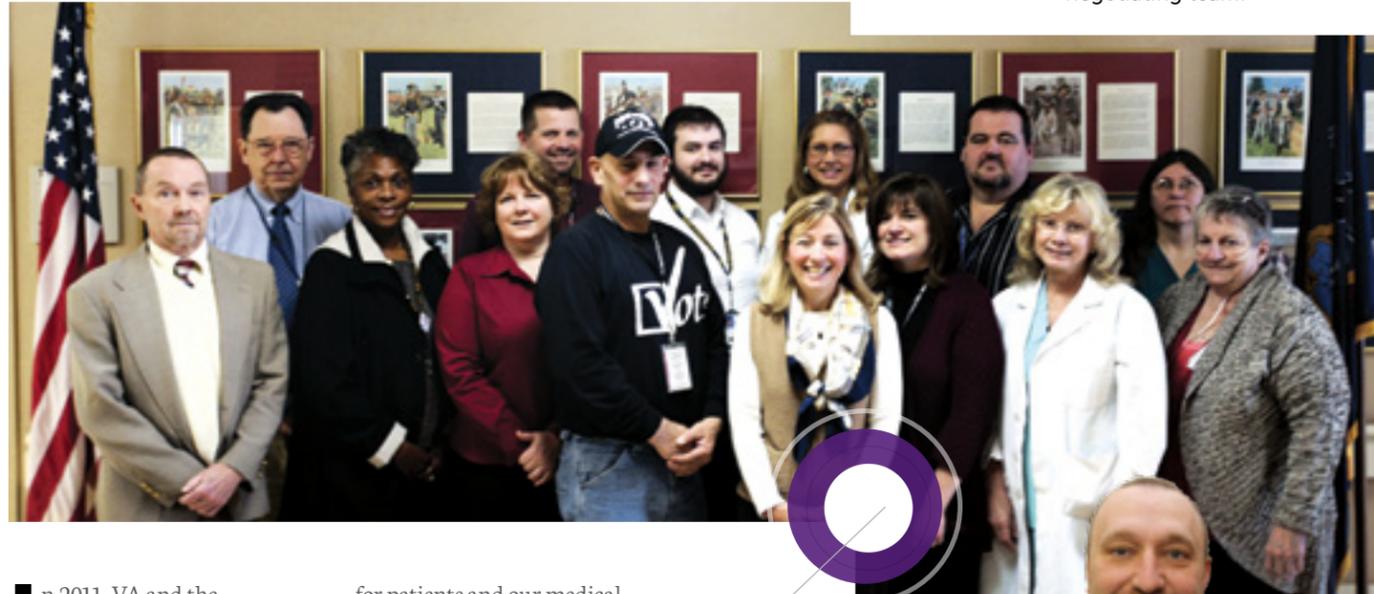
- Felissa Koernig, PMF Group Leader



**Presidential Management Fellows (l to r):** Kyle Berger, Larkin Harris, Jason Cave, Michelle McBee, and Jose Garcia.

# Wilkes-Barre VA, AFGE Agree in Record Time

New collective bargaining agreement marked by good communication, concern for patients



**Pictured Below:** Members of the 2012 labor-management negotiating team.

In 2011, VA and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) signed a new collective bargaining agreement, strengthening the working relationship between VA management and more than 200,000 bargaining unit employees. In 2012, Wilkes-Barre management and AFGE leadership followed their lead by successfully negotiating our own bargaining agreement.

“The (negotiation sessions) followed the letter of what interest-based bargaining is supposed to be,” said Mark Donnelly, Wilkes-Barre’s Chief of Police, and leader of the negotiations for the management side. “Everyone involved wanted to build the best contract we could

for patients and our medical center. Both sides really were dedicated to that.”

Donnelly credited Mike Evans, Wilkes Barre’s AFGE president, and negotiators on both sides for keeping negotiations on track and wrapped up in record time—less than three weeks.

“Everyone did their homework way ahead of time: there were good communications between the parties; and we set ground rules at the beginning of the process that were kept up throughout,” he explained. “I hope we can continue this relationship in the future.”

**Patient-Driven**



“This kind of bargaining is what you want to see everywhere—but it’s not what you expect!”

- Mark Donnelly, Wilkes-Barre Chief of Police

## Among the highlights of the agreement are:

- ★ An agreement on changes to shifts throughout the facility to provide sufficient time for “hand-offs” of information from one shift to the next, and for attendance at staff education programs, while minimizing the use of overtime.
- ★ A change to overtime call rosters allowing clear-cut decisions about which staff members will work overtime if needed, and under what circumstances they will be asked. This provision will help ensure that those who volunteer for it do more overtime, and less compulsory overtime is required.
- ★ A new definition of “disaster” situations, such as flooding and other weather conditions, so that employees know when “all hands on deck” will be required.

# Wilkes-Barre Employees Win National VA Awards

Environment, Security employees honored by VA Central Office

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, employees are at the forefront of programs designed to reduce VA’s environmental footprint. In 2010, the Department instituted “Green Routine” awards to recognize the efforts of VA employees who adopt, implement, and promote conservation and sustainability. Kevin Parris, Motor Pool and Grounds Supervisor at Wilkes-Barre, won national recognition in 2012 for his special contribution to green, sustainable practices.

Kevin was recognized for finding an innovative way to efficiently melt snow and ice while causing less damage to the environment and infrastructure than rock salt. His research led him to a substance called Magic Minus Zero, a liquid that when applied to rock salt reduces its corrosivity, drops its minimum effective temperature, and ends plant kill. In addition, Magic Minus Zero is the only EPA-certified ice melt product on the market.

Working with a local company, Kevin arranged to treat Wilkes-Barre’s 70 tons of rock salt with the product. As a result, complaints of slippery surfaces outside our facility have all but disappeared—and it’s easier to clean up snow and ice that’s tracked indoors. And, because we need to spread less rock salt on our grounds after it snows, there’s even been a small cost savings!

**Patient-Driven**



**Pictured:** (top) Kevin Parris (right) 2012 Green Routine Award Winner, with Maintenance Supervisor Hank O’Hop. (bottom): 2012 Outstanding Police Officers Sgt. Thomas Evans (left) and Lt. Joseph Hussey.



VA’s Office of Security and Law Enforcement is charged with delivering professional law enforcement and security services, while maintaining law and order and protecting persons and property on all VA campuses and buildings. Every year, the Office offers three awards for outstanding service: Police Officer/Patrolman of the Year; Lead/Training Officer of the Year; and Supervisor of the Year.

In 2012, Wilkes-Barre was notified that not one, but two of its Police Officers had been selected for these prestigious awards. Lt. Joseph Hussey was selected as

Supervisor of the Year and Sgt. Thomas Evans was selected as Lead/Training Officer of the Year for VA’s small and medium-sized facilities.

Both Lt. Hussey and Sgt. Evans were recognized for their principled performance of their duties and for their exceptional service to patients and visitors. They received their awards at the 2012 VA Chiefs of Police Symposium, held in San Antonio, Texas in March 2012.

